

Dressed Up

HE WAS of the old school. He believed in cold steel. "All this cricket-ball stuff," he would say, referring to the Mills bomb with professional contempt—"why, a man don't see what 'tis 'im. And wot a man don't see 'e ain't afraid of." And he would go on to talk about "morale" and to point out how in the end it was steel that made 'em run—that took the guts out of 'em—figuratively and literally.

The Sergeant-Major had been through several campaigns and he knew. Now he had a little tobacconists' shop off the Walworth Road. He was a good man, doing a tidy business and much respected. On Sundays he wore an old-fashioned frock coat and carried the plate at the Wesleyan chapel of which he and Emmeline, his wife, were members. On week-days, over the counter he would give his customers a friendly wink and a twenty-to-one tip.

That, of course, was before the war.

When the war office, in need of experts, dug him out of retirement the Sergeant-Major encased his wiry old legs in puttees, handed over the business to Emmeline and went back to his old job of making soldiers. Having been in the Coldstreams he had high ideals and a way with him. No one knew how many gawkish civilians went out of his hands straight-shouldered, word-of-command Guardsmen almost up to pre-war standards.

Battalions came and went on the dreary Westbury Plain but the Sergeant-Major stayed. He would stand at the door of the N. C. O's mess and watch them come blundering and panting up the hill with their kit-bags slung over their shoulders all anyhow, and he would watch them go—one-two, one-two, smart as you please—down-hill and into the belt of fog. He knew them by name and kept the daily printed lists on file with a cross against those he had trained himself. He could tell you exactly where they failed or excelled.

"Bill Saunders, now—he was a fine one when the drink was in him. Cold sober he was like a rabbit. If they sent Bill over the top without an extra tot of rum it was a crime."

He spoke as of an artist deprived of legitimate material.

The Sergeant-Major had a snappy, barking voice. He looked like an elderly, rheumy-eyed terrier with bushy eyebrows and a scrubby bristling mustache. He walked stiffly, his shoulders thrown back, trying to disguise rheumatic twinges.

In the evening, his duties over, he wrote home to Emmeline about the shop. He sat with his head bent close to the paper and his tongue between his teeth. Emmeline was doing her bit all right, but she didn't know the ins and outs of trade and had a soft heart for good-looking customers who wanted credit. The Sergeant-Major, amidst advice and admonition, comforted her.

"When this here blasted war is over—" he wrote.

They were C. 3 men. That is to say the scum and scourgings of a nation at the end of three years of expensive warfare. Speaking physically. Tinker, tailor, beggar-man, thief—but not a born soldier among them. And not one without a heart murmur, a dubious lung or a varicose vein.



The Sergeant-Major looking them over on that bleak March morning pursed his lips. "Gawd!" he said.

They looked back at him apologetically. To be alive at all at that stage of the game was either a miracle or a disgrace. And they were obviously a disgrace. Shame had been stamped on their bodies from the moment they had stood shivering and mother-naked under the ironic eyes of the medical officers. Now the Sergeant-Major stamped shame on their souls. For his little gimlet eyes saw how afraid they were.

"Don't you be down-hearted," the Sergeant-Major said. "I'll make soldiers of you."

They weren't unwilling. They weren't even afraid in the ordinary sense. Being killed at that moment was nothing compared to the terrifying mystery and strangeness of the metamorphosis that was expected of them. Back there in the dim past of yesterday they had known who they were. Now they were just numbers. They meant nothing to themselves. In the long, low hut which had been the home of thousands of profane and worried men, now comfortably dead, they looked with surreptitious astonishment at their legs in the unfamiliar clothing and at their feet in their heavy army boots. Towards each other they were as wary and tentative as strange dogs.

It was Sam Rogers, huddled by the red, glowering stove and groaning with backache, who brought them uneasily together. They compared the physical disabilities that had kept them out of things for three years.

A miserable three years. A nightmare. People had looked at you. "Why aren't you at the front, young man?" You could see the question in their eyes. Or you thought you saw it. Despised anyway. Unfit. A beastly thing to be reminded of, day in, day out. That was over, thank God. They were out of that.

But the disabilities remained, even though the authorities graciously overlooked them. Cobham had a weak chest, but the medical officer had assured him it would last him as long as he'd need it. Haselton had a gamy knee. And so on. The only sound one among them was Jim Cuffy, who had been exempted for land work. It seemed that Cuffy had a peculiar talent for pigs. Now a woman had got his job. Cuffy talked incessantly about his pigs, his blue, rather foolish eyes wide with anxiety.

"Stands to reason no woman could know the ways of pigs," he said. "Pigs is peculiar animals. They don't stand no foolishness."

"It feels queer—my being a soldier," said Cobham.

"You ain't."

"You wait till that there Sergeant-Major's done with you."

"Looks as though we'd caught a gory Tartar."

"If my missus could see me nah—in this 'ere rig-out."

In spite of the huge iron stove they couldn't get the place warm.

Illustrations by
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*No more tinker and tailor, but fighters
—trained fighters who were going to show
that they had learned their trade . . .*

By I. A. R. Wylie

There was something about that idiotic bag dangling at the end of a cord—something about its good-natured, helpless rotundity and the white-chalked, astonished eyes and gaping mouth that made Cobham feel awful. And when he jabbed at it, driving home to the hilt in his nervousness, it gave way with a sort of “grumph” of bewilderment and

pain as though it were exclaiming, “What did you do that for, old man? What’s the great idea?”

That was the first phase. In those days they still talked about their jobs and their people and were hag-ridden with worries about the life they had left behind them. At night their limbs ached so that they couldn’t sleep and they lay tossing and groaning, tormented by an inarticulate homesickness.

Before dawn a vixenish bugle-call tore them out of a brief unconsciousness. They huddled into the still unfamiliar tunics, fumbling with straps and buckles, sweating with dread of the drill that they would never learn, of that treacherous cotter-pin that you had to pull out at the right moment or the darned thing might explode in your hand, of the march over the endless plain, in full equipment, to prove that by the skin of your teeth you could just lurch in at the end of the last mile.

They were still what they had been. Tinker, tailor, beggarman, thief. Anything and everything. Isolated individuals revolving in bewilderment, and suffering.

Then gradually they began to suffer less. Their past slipped from them. Their different backgrounds were sponged out and merged into the gray plains; the boss, the manager, the foreman became a composite figure common to them all and master of their common destiny—the Sergeant-Major. They cursed him without anger. They swore the same oaths that seemed to have been left behind as a heritage by their ghostly predecessors.

They learned to wind their puttees with precision. The little quirks, the individual inexactitudes that had got them into endless trouble, were obliterated. Their faces, so diversified in feature, took on a curious uniformity. Though they were all shapes and sizes they had learned to move like one man.

They discovered the pub in the village three miles away. It was a desolate place and the girl who served them a blowzy slut. But they talked incessantly of her. Of women. Talk that came to them from they didn’t know where. At night the long, low hut reeked of it and of boots and sweat.

In those days Cobham could hardly thrust at all. Boredom had settled on him like a fog. His limbs were sodden with it. His mind was yellow and thick with it.

The Sergeant-Major ground his teeth. He made noises in his throat like an enraged gorilla—“G-r-r-r”—and the platoon copied him with a half-hearted ferocity—“G-r-r-r”—stabbing upwards, but not too heavily lest you got your bayonet entangled with some tough interior organ requiring a discharge to be broken up. Sheer waste of ammunition. And the nation couldn’t afford waste.

The Sergeant-Major knew what had happened. The whole company had gone stale. Not that it had ever been much good. But now that the incentive of novelty and fear was played out it had got worse. It had gone bad on him. It was the fault of the W. O. who had apparently forgotten that it had ever existed, leaving it to rot on the Sergeant-Major’s hands.

“Isn’t there any bloody hole they could fill up with these her-

And yet it was stifling too. The air tasted of bootleather and rank tobacco and stale oaths. Cobham went to the door and opened it. For a moment the crowded men were silent, caught by a faint thudding, so ghostly that they were hardly aware of it, so profound that it seemed to weaken the earth under their feet.

“Wot’s that?”

“Guns.”

“Wot guns?”

“Over there.”

“G’arn.”

“It’s true. You can always hear them on still nights. There isn’t anything between us and the sea.”

From where Cobham stood he could look over the whole plain, its melancholy static waves merging into the low gray sky. The army huts crouched together in its loneliness like black sheep.

“They say it’ll be over in six weeks.”

“They’ve been saying that for years.”

“Stands to reason—”

“There ain’t no reason.”

“Well, anyhow,” said Cobham, speaking out of his thoughts, “I don’t care. The boss promised to keep my job for me.”

Someone laughed. “They all do.”

“Cheerio. Chances are you won’t ever ask ‘em for it.”

BUT Cobham was thinking of a litter of kittens his sister had given him to drown. He didn’t know why he thought of them. He remembered sitting on the river’s edge stroking their dank fur with a trembling forefinger and feeling awful. Then afterwards he had run away like a murderer.

“When I sees blood I faints,” Haselton explained. “It’s wot they calls a hidiosyncrasy. I told that there doctor and ‘e just laughs. ‘Then you won’t want no chloroform when they chops your leg off,’ ‘e says.”

“The bloody swine!”

Cobham drew himself up, catching his shallow breath. He thought of the way the Sergeant-Major had looked at him and he made up his mind. You could do anything if you only made up your mind. The book on “Personality and Success” said so.

“I’ll show him,” Cobham thought. “I’ll show him.”

He saw himself being decorated on the field of battle. He had captured a salient single-handed. He wondered vaguely what a salient looked like.

“And for Gawd’s sake shut that blinking door,” said Bill Rogers, shivering.

It wasn’t so easy.

With regard to bayonet practise, for instance. Cobham went through two distinct stages. At first, if he struck in cold blood, picking out the throat or armpit—a peculiarly useful spot on account of the arteries concealed there—something happened at the pit of his stomach. Once he had been disgustingly sick.

A "Wot are you old
boys gettin' ready for
—the next war?"



a down on—someone
wot's done you dirty
and who's comin' at
you to give you the
K. O.

"Wot you going to
do about it? You
with a blinkin' bay-
onet in your mits?
Let 'im come at you?
Not you. You ain't
going to stand it—not

even though you isn't much better than
a new-born mouse. No, you ups and
gives 'im six inches of cold steel in the
guts. That's wot you does, ain't it?"

The idea was new to them. They
grinned at it. Of course there was

rag-pickings?" the Sergeant-Major demanded of high heaven.

He knew better than to expect an answer. The job of keeping
this third-class fighting machine at concert pitch remained his.
His officers were no good—dugouts or young cubs who couldn't
give an order without referring to their manual. Even the other
N. C. O.'s were raw stuff. Sergeant-Major felt himself to be the
last representative of an order that was passing away.

HE STOOD on a strip of rising ground leaning against the wind
that seemed to haunt the plains like a damned spirit, and
looked down at the pinched, blue-tinted faces of the platoon under
instruction. An inspecting general had made the rounds the day
before and things had gone badly. The Sergeant-Major had
come into his share—handed down from colonel to captain and
from captain to the latest acquired subaltern. Afterwards the
Sergeant-Major had written home to Emmeline.

"It was God's truth. They ain't even good for cannon-fodder.
Nobody but an idjit would waste powder on them. They
haven't a pen'noth of natcheral spunk between them—"

Now he stood there, his thin wiry legs straddled a little, and
ground his yellow teeth. The platoon faced each other in gro-
tesque attitudes of attack, watching him out of the corner of their
eyes with a sullen intentness. They were useless. The Sergeant-
Major's rage died down to a sort of embittered pity. They might
repeat the same movements a dozen times, but the real heart of
their job was hidden from them.

"You're fighting," the Sergeant-Major barked. "You aren't
poking at sawdust dolls with a bloody hatpin. Wot you've got
to do if you can't fight natcheral is to think of someone you've got

always somebody you'd like to have a go at.

"Me blasted old mother-in-law, fr'instance," Haverstone
whispered hoarsely. "Watch me give her one."

And Higgins was remembering Rogers. The night before
Rogers in a senseless fit of exasperation had kicked over the
the checker-board just when Albert Higgins had been on the
point of victory. But it hadn't occurred to Higgins to go for him
even with his fists. They had just cursed futilely at one another.
Now Higgins visualized Rogers in the act of wanton and unsport-
ing aggression. He recalled the stupid, suffused face to his own
inarticulate fury, which hadn't known which way to turn for
relief.

A gust of stinging, exasperating wind filled Higgins's eyes with
dust. There was dust in his mouth. His teeth were gritty with it.
Everything had gone wrong that morning. A boot-lace had
snapped. One of those blasted puttees had come unwound.
He'd been late for inspection. And Cobham, who'd been made
lance-corporal because he'd got education and was a bloody
pusher, had had the cheek to shout at him.

Suddenly, viciously he lunged.

"'Ere—wot the 'ell?" Rogers gasped. He struck back blindly,
his eyes rounded with indignant astonishment. The rifles
clashed, slithered ineffectually past one another. The whole
platoon flashed into action, stabbing, lunging. But Rogers and
Albert Higgins were almost motionless, locked together, body
against body in an inexorable embrace. They didn't seem able to
free themselves.

To Higgins there was something horrible about Rogers's face.
It was too big. The eyes were like those of a wild steer. He

hated the feel of the panting breast against his own. He felt sick.

A familiar voice barked at them. They drew away reluctantly, avoiding each other's eyes. There was blood on Higgins's hand. He rubbed it off on the seat of his breeches. He didn't want Rogers to see that he'd been hurt.

"By all the rules and regulations you're both dead men," the Sergeant-Major commented bitterly. "You ain't committing suicide, are you?"

He snatched the rifle out of Rogers's hands and showed him the parry and thrust, the platoon standing at ease, watching, and breathless with the unexpected explosion of violence in them.

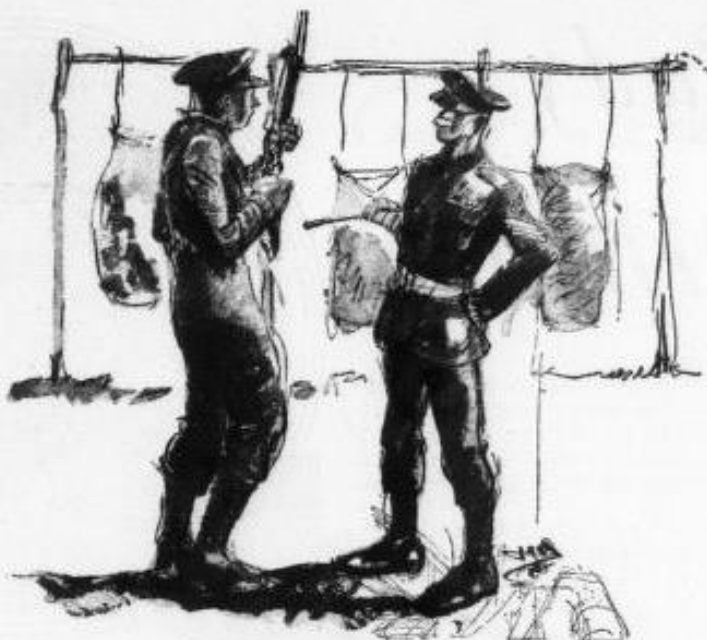
The thing worked, anyway. Particularly where Cobham was concerned.

Cobham was inarticulate, but he had imagination. He saw pictures inside his head—pictures of Cobham taking a salient single-handed, Cobham rising to the position of manager at the branch bank, Cobham married to the pretty cashier who wrote to him once a week and was knitting a muffler for him.

All he had to do was to make a picture of someone who'd done him dirty. Then he wouldn't be so bored. He'd be keen. He'd become a first-class soldier. Even the Sergeant-Major would have to admit it. By the end of the war he'd be a captain and all the bank officials would say "Bravo, Cobham, old man," and be proud to know him.

It was a pity that Cobham was such a disarmingly friendly fellow. He'd never had an enemy. And for the life of him he couldn't remember anyone who'd done him anything that deserved six inches of cold steel anywhere.

Cobham tried to imagine somebody particularly hideous and detestable. Just before bayonet practise he would get himself all worked up about some monster who spent his leisure moments cutting off the hands of small children. The only trouble was that Cobham couldn't see him clearly. The moment he tried to give the fiend eyes and a nose and a mouth, he became just



"If you can't fight natcheral, think of someone you've a down on." "Me blasted old mother-in-law, f'r instance."

Someone who had done you out of something—

It got to be the bugle blasting you out of sleep at five o'clock in bitter mornings—fatigues, long, meaningless marches in full kit over the bleak hills, straps galling your shoulders, your feet gummed in the mud or aching with the hard, cracked earth, your rifle a malevolent burden you didn't know how to carry for sheer misery, your breath coming in sobs.

It got to be the well-meaning ladies and gentlemen who came to sing mildly comic songs and painfully patriotic ballads to you at week-ends. It came to be the phonograph. It got to be the food. It got to be the monotony.

To keep going you invented a dull smoldering anger that at a given moment would explode into action.

ROGERS had been drinking and his perpetual backache made him short-tempered. And when the blowzy barmaid at the King's Head asked him ironically, "Wot are you old boys gettin' ready for—the next war?" he threw his beer-mug at her and cut her head open. Immediately the squalid, melancholy barroom was convulsed by a crazy uproar—the barmaid in hysterics, screaming that she had been murdered, and a free fight breaking out among groups of men from different companies who had never seen each other before.

Cobham, as lance-corporal, called in a couple of Military Police who arrived, red-hatted and portentous, to take the befuddled and indignant Rogers to the extemporary clink behind the canteen. Cobham trailed behind them. He himself was sullen with a resentment that focused itself on one thing after another. The barmaid's joke was an old one. The battalion—with the front screaming for reinforcements—had rotted on the Plains for six months. Six months of it. And even your girl not writing you any more—not after that last post-card asking if you'd joined the conscientious objectors. And going off to night-clubs with a fellow who'd been in it since 1914 and had the D. C. M.

It was raining too. In torrents. The road, mashed to a quagmire by horses, gun-carriages and a million marching men, seemed to slide away from under him like a nightmarish moving platform. Just in front Rogers, sagging between his captors, kept up a stream of miserable protest.

The M. P.'s maintained a stately silence.

The rain lashed Cobham's hot face. A friend at the bank had written him that Chisholm, that ferret-eyed nephew of the manager, had been given his desk. It'd take dynamite to pry him loose from it. Suppose (Continued on page 178)

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"By all the rules and regulations, you're both dead men. You ain't committing suicide, are you?"

All Dressed Up *(Continued from page 81)*

they didn't keep their promise about giving him back his job. And what was the matter with Madge anyway? Hadn't women any sense of justice?

His mind was like an ant-heap squirming and wriggling with one worry after another. He didn't care a rap about the war. He wouldn't care a rap if they did take his stripe from him. As to that invisible enemy that never came to grips—he was sick of him. Sick to death. Sick of hand-grenades exploding uselessly and sick of outmarching armies that didn't exist—sick of charging into empty trenches and prodding men with a sheathed bayonet. Sick of the whole blasted farce. If it went on much longer you wouldn't be able to believe anything—not even in your own existence.

The sentries, immense shrouded figures looming behind the slanting downpour, challenged them.

Wrapped as he was in the blanketing clouds of his depression, Cobham became aware of some vital change. There was movement. A sort of invisible mental movement that you felt. The door of the recreation hut stood open and young Phelps—who had something mysterious the matter with his insides—shouted at Cobham with a queer high-pitched voice.

"I say, Cobham, we're off—we're off!"

"Tell that to the Marines!"

"But it's true. Tomorrow. They say there's going to be a break through. We're being rushed up to the front lines. Kit inspection in an hour."

A strange feeling came over Cobham. He had had it once before—in a dream. He had dreamed that he was floating in mid-air—lifted right out of life, above himself—so that he could look down on himself from a great distance. It was like that.

He said quietly to the M. P.'s: "Let him go, can't you?"

And they in turn looked at their captive with a queer look—as though in a moment he had changed under their hands. Not any more a mere drink-sodden rowdy, but somebody set

apart—someone different from themselves.

They nodded briefly. "They'd let 'im off anyway. Seeing 'ow things are."

"Gawd!" Rogers muttered.

They went into the hut. Half the company was there. But there was also an unaccustomed quiet—a peculiar peace. Men moved softly—spoke in undertones, gently, to one another. Most of them were writing, bent low over the paper, their thick, difficult fingers gripping the pens hard.

Cobham caught his breath. He didn't know that he had been stabbed through with the realization of a strange beauty. The ordered tumult and squalor of their lives had settled like a sediment and in the yellow clarity of the lamplight the bowed heads had a look of sanctified innocence and youth.

Cuffy and Fred Smith crouched together by the stove. They whispered to one another. They weren't like the rest. They were country people, sound in wind and limb and rather stupid. They knew nothing real about the war or their share of it. They wanted to get home—back to the formless good that they had left behind them. The others glanced at them with a vague hostility. They were outsiders to this new emotion. Cuffy was actually talking about his pigs—his voice sounding on the verge of tears.

Cobham found a vacant place at the long table. He felt for his fountain pen and his note-book. He was surprised to see how his hand trembled. He himself was quite steady. Not a bit afraid. Of course he was going to die. They all were. It was rot to say that men never believed they would be killed. Cobham knew he would be killed. The last draft had been wiped out as though a giant had put his foot on it. Squelch.

It was all right, though. Everything was all right. He was happy. There were tears in his throat. Sheer beauty. So young. So splendid and beautiful to die when you were young. He was glad to think what a good lob he had with those cursed grenades. And last week the Sergeant-Major had said to him:

"You're coming on, bantam. You'll be a

fighting-cock by the time I'm through with you."

It was going to be real at last. No mere make-believe. All the things that you had learned—that had become nauseatingly meaningless—well, you had to know them now or be kicked out. Out of life. No mistakes. No fiddling with that tricky little cotter-pin.

And you were going to see yourself too. For the first time. Yourself stripped of all the things you thought you were—in action—your secret, your real self.

That was the greatest adventure.

Cobham began to write. He felt calm and exalted.

Dearest Madge:

This is just to tell you that we have marching orders. They are rushing us to the front. If you would come to the station—just to give us a send-off—

The Sergeant-Major marched with his company—one-two, one-two, quick step—his shoulders thrown back, hiding how bent they felt. It was a queer irony that the Sergeant-Major who had been with the Coldstreams should go into the best war of all with a crowd of nondescripts. But there it was. Life was like that. Sergeant-Major was an old soldier who took things as they came.

They marched down the hill into the belt of autumn fog.

He hadn't thought they would ever send him. He wasn't so young any more. But of course they were short of real fighters. They needed the old stuff to strengthen the new, untried metal.

It was all right.

The night before he had written home to Emmeline—with his tongue clenched very hard between his teeth.

"The men are first-rate. I've made a good job of them. You wouldn't know them from the real thing. Now don't you fret. Get Aunt Sophie to take the shop for an hour and give us a wave, old girl."

The high glass-domed station was a bowl of fog in which lights swam like dimly iridescent fish over a dark tangle of moving undergrowth. Groups of soldiers were gathered round the iron gates leading to the platforms. They had been there every night for so many years that they had become a part of life. Other travelers passed them shyly. Their kits lay at their feet, their rifles were slung over their shoulders. The faces that looked out from between the upturned collars of their greatcoats were impassive—the eyes in shadow.

There were only a few to say good-by. Most of the draft were from the north and their good-byes were over. But Cobham's girl was there and old Emmeline. Old Emmeline was large and stout, with a bonnet tilted a little over one ear. She and the Sergeant-Major scarcely spoke to one another. They were both old soldiers who took their orders without talking. But under the fat and wrinkles one might have traced the shadowy outlines of a lost, unhappy child.

Cobham's girl had dressed herself in her best. She stood close to him and told him about her war work and the dances she had been to. She fidgeted with her gloves. Every now and then their eyes met.

A whistle sounded. The Sergeant-Major rapped out an order. The iron gates rolled back. The men bent to gather up their kits.

Cobham's girl flung herself on his breast. She dug her thin white fingers into the folds of his tunic.

"I've been a beast—a beast. There's never been anyone else in the world."

And now he was going to die. They both knew it. He held her close, comforting her gently. People looked away from them as from something intolerable. But Cobham felt on the very crest of life. He was living, as in those days of stodgy routine he could not have imagined it possible to live—briefly, but with an austere, white-hot intensity.

The gates shut behind them. Drawn faces

were pressed against the bars. One-two, one-two.

Doors slammed. The train began to slide out of the station like a piece of driftwood drawn out of its backwater by an inexorable tide towards the sea.

Cobham stood with his elbows on the tuff-rail. Every light had been extinguished. Through the thick, moving obscurity he could only imagine the ship under his feet—or himself. Every now and then he ran his hand over the life-belt about his waist to remind himself that he was alive. It was easier to believe in the death slyly and patiently groping for them through the black invisible water. Once he thought he saw it glide alongside, showing a thin white light of foam.

Cuffy stood beside him. Cuffy, he felt sure, was blubbering. It made Cobham sick with impatience. He wanted to get away from Cuffy as from something unclean. Through the throb of the engines—and they too sounded muffled as though the ship herself were aware and creeping stealthily along a path infested by assassins—he could feel Cuffy crying.

But neither of them spoke. And Cobham thought of the white cliffs that he couldn't see and would never see again. And tears came into his own eyes. But they were hot splendid tears that a man need not be ashamed of. It was a grand thing to die on the very crest of life—not miserably and uselessly like an old diseased rat creeping into its hole.

He felt movement behind the black wall against his eyes. He seemed to hear the rush of invisible wings. A hand laid itself on his arm. He recognized Rogers's voice—become almost unrecognizable.

"It's the Dover Patrol. They're conveying us. Great lads."

Cobham felt fire run up his spine. He had to set his teeth against a sob. The Dover Patrol. Name of an enduring heroism. And between those faceless legendary men and himself ran a fiery bond of comradeship.

"*Morituri te salutamus.*"

That old gorgeous tag.

"Those gory blighters, we'll show 'em!"

A kind of rough joy sounded in the once querulous voice. Rogers had lost his backache. Cobham began to hum under his breath. Some idiotic song he'd heard at the Coliseum that night he and Madge had gone out together for the last time. He had held her hand. He was in uniform. Before she had always refused. And he had known that she was ashamed of his civilian clothes.

It was all right now.

Rogers's shoulder was pressed gently against his. Good old Rogers. You wouldn't have to prod him over the top. Perhaps they'd go together.

How proud she'd been! Nobody had ever been proud of him before. In a way he was dying for her. He imagined her lying on her bed in the girls' hotel where she lived, her white fingers twisted in the folds of the bedclothes and crying—crying. He didn't suppose—for now he had put dreams and all other childish toys away from him—that she would ever know how the end came. Things like that only happened in slushy stories. And this was real. But she would know that he had done his best. He wouldn't make a mess of things.

Supposing he just got a "blighty." Some men did—and came home and were patched up and sent back again and again. Or—or were too messed up even for that. No. He turned his mind away. He was possessed of a calm fatalism—a certainty. It wouldn't happen like that. It would be as he wished it: clean, final, one superb gesture.

And that infernal Cuffy snuffling like a kid that had lost its mother.

There was no doubt that they were in a hurry—whoever "they" were. The tide was flowing faster, spreading its banks till it swept with you the gathered remnants of a whole nation in arms. Worcestershires, Lancashires, Argylls, Naval Reserve, Artillery—*pêle-mêle*—

down gang-planks, through base camps into foul-smelling, congested trucks that jolted hideously. Night and day. But always forward—eastwards, the very slowness of that vast movement suggesting depths of urgency—the unfelt speed of a universe whirling through space—invisible to itself.

The divisional train halted at the big stations and Englishwomen, neat in uniform—and thank God they were English and could be inarticulate and friendly too—handed up thick sandwiches and mugs of steaming coffee. You crowded up to them like stray anxious dogs wanting to be patted. There was one a bit like Madge, who smiled at Cobham.

"Good luck—good luck."

She was a new hand. Quite a kid. Or perhaps she was one of the sort that never got used to things. Her eyes filled with tears. For she too knew that he was going to die. And as the train pulled out he stood at the open door of the truck, gallantly at the salute and laughing down at her.

"*Morituri te salutamus*—"

On again. Through a drab, crawling twilight into night. Their bones began to ache. Their faces in the dim light of an oil-lamp gaped with stupefaction. They were like the faces of thieves and murderers. Their bodies were like the bodies of the cattle that had preceded them—close-packed, and giving out an acrid stench of excitement and fear and deathly weariness.

About midnight they jolted to a standstill. Whistles shrilled. The doors of the trucks were flung open. They scrambled down stiffly to soggy, trampled earth. They huddled close to one another. There was a thin ground-fog through which they discerned starlight and their own ghostliness. It isolated them in an immediate silence. It shrouded their voices, the faint clash of arms and the stir of their uneasy feet so that they should hear more clearly what lay beyond—that one stupendous undertone.

Gun-fire.

They had heard it before. Not like this. They had been shivering. Now they stood very still, with their faces lifted and turned eastwards.

Officers with torchlights and papers in their hands ran backwards and forwards. Orders were given quietly. They moved on—into emptiness. They knew nothing. Only the one thing. Their limbs that had been stiff with cold and fatigue became mechanical instruments of their tense wills. They forgot the incredible burdens that they carried. They were strung to a high pitch of achievement that they might never know again. No more tinker, tailor, but fighters—trained fighters who, by heaven, were going to show that they had learned their trade.

Cuffy and Fred Smith marched together, not speaking, their heads bowed like cattle.

The Sergeant-Major dressed his lines as though on parade.

"Now then—step out, men. No lagging. We're on their heels. We'll show them."

His own knees shook under him. Not so young any more. Broken-down. Like an old cab-horse. Please God he'd stop one before the men saw how it was with him. An old Guardsman dropping in his track. He'd got to stiffen them. That's what he was there for. Morale.

Queer muddled visions swam before his eyes: Emmeline, the tobacco shop, chapel on Sunday fading into the nightmare of mud; his dreadful weakness, his shame.

Lights on the horizon. Flashes that opened and closed like a flaming fan. They stared fascinated. Every flash meant something—what they didn't know. Not yet. Thud—thud—under their feet, as though their own tormented footsteps awoke echoes in the very bowels of the earth. Through the fog, transfused by moonlight, they caught glimpses of a strange, mournful country like the shadowy vision of a forsaken inferno. As the dawn broke they saw the convulsed earth—poisoned to its roots.

They were on a road flanked by gigantic gutters filled with refuse. They didn't care to look too close. Sometimes they were almost forced over the brink by lorries jolting past driven by grim-faced men who didn't care what they drove over so long as they got where they were going. Troops resting by the wayside who didn't speak, but who looked at you curiously and a little disdainfully as though they knew something that you didn't.

You'd show them!

And then no road at all. Trenches. Half-submerged duck boards. Some old battlefield. Perhaps not so old either. The barbed wire was freshly cut. There were bits of things that hadn't moldered yet. Behind an artificial screen of wood and earth, like the nest of some sinister bird, Cobham recognized the wreck of a machine gun and huddled over it a bundle of rags—rags of a dull green.

Cobham jerked his thumb. "German."

And Rogers nodded. "We must be almost up to 'em. Something big on. Gawd—wot a bloody mess!"

Cobham tried to remember all he had ever learned about machine guns. No frontal attack. You wormed round them on all sides. And then—bayonet work. Or better still—a couple of well-planted grenades that would knock the crew clean out.

No more throwing into emptiness. Next time he took his aim it would be at men. His bayonet would go home into live flesh. He would know at last how it really felt.

The dawn spread out, sickly and menacing, over the low, ragged sky. The gun-fire had died out. An ominous quiet brooded over the sodden devastation. Ahead of them a group of trees cowered together like gray skeletons twisted in the attitudes of a final agony. In all the tormented world about them they seemed the things the most sad, the most tormented.

They had been part of a peaceful village life, long forgotten. The village itself lay beyond them—a few walls, a roofless cow shed, a chimney thrust up at the gray sky like an accusing finger.

The whistle sounded. They halted, swaying on their feet. The rhythm of the march was broken and they could hardly stand. They muttered rumors to one another. They were awaiting reinforcements. They would be in touch with the enemy within an hour. A sergeant in charge of a ragged company on its way back to the rest camp stared at them with inflamed eyes. Cobham heard him speak to the Sergeant-Major. His voice sounded unnatural like that of a rusty machine.

Yes. There was dirty work ahead. The enemy retreating to new lines, fighting every inch of the way. Nests of machine guns, like vipers, hidden at such angles that they enfiladed you from all sides. One machine gun, handled by a single survivor, had torn his company to ribbons before they had knocked the fellow out.

They served out rum. That proved it. They only gave you rum when you were in for trouble.

Within an hour they'd know. It would have happened.

Cobham and thirty men of his company found quarters in a cellar under the cow shed. The straw on the rancid earth smelled foul and was infested by rats reckless with hunger. But they dropped where they stood. They lay stretched out side by side like dead men. A shaft of yellow light through a hole in the vaulted roof fell on Cuffy's upturned face. It was like the face of an overgrown child that had sobbed itself to sleep—still puckered and grimy with perplexity and grief. Cobham, seeing it, rolled over, fighting a dark, rising tide of exasperation.

But in their sleep they couldn't rest. Their aching feet still staggered over ruts and sank into pits of sucking slime. They pushed on—on and on. Somebody had started them off and they couldn't stop any more. The dark twilight about them was thick with their harsh breathing, the broken oaths and sighs of their excessive misery.

Cobham didn't want to rest. He wanted to get on with it. He couldn't rest anyway. The rum had mounted to his brain and filled it with a succession of fantastic episodes. He was always fighting. This parry—that lunge. The bloody cotter-pin that wouldn't come out. Now he was crawling forward on his stomach—a machine-gunner, spraying the advance, had his back to him. Another yard and Cobham would have planted six inches of cold steel in the fellow's ribs. But it never came to that. At the last moment the picture faded out. And Cobham rolled over, sweating, to begin again.

He planned a new attack, rehearsing every trick and subterfuge that he had ever learned. He wasn't afraid—not even of fear. But he was afraid of being slower than the other man, of being outwitted by that faceless enormity that was at last to come over the brow of the plains to meet him. Some fellows had been sniped before they had fired a shot.

"If only I don't lose my head," he thought—"if only I get a decent chance."

He lay with his face to the evil-smelling earth, resting his aching back. He saw his name written against the red retina of his eyes.

"John Cobham. Lance-corporal. Killed in action."

What were the others thinking—the men who had lain here before them—the waves of other battles already spent? Perhaps the enemy had been here—the man he was to kill and the man who would kill him, lying with his face to the earth.

Someone was snoring, like a bull. Cobham couldn't bear it. His nerves were fiddle strings at which the sound plucked with brutal fingers. He kicked out savagely. The man scrambled to his feet with a harsh cry.

"Gawd—they're coming—they're coming!"

The straw was alive with writhing, twisting shapes. The stench became suddenly unendurable.

"Lie down, you fool. Keep quiet, can't you?"

"Then wot did 'e kick me for? Can't a poor devil rest?"

The wave subsided. Quiet again—feverish, broken by the twitching of limbs, the scuttling of rats. Cobham's head began to ache miserably. He thought of Madge. There were things he wanted to say to her. He'd been too proud—too shy. And now it was too late. Perhaps he could send a message. Rogers would give it to her. Rogers was lying next him. Surely Rogers would get through. He groped blindly through the dark.

"Rogers, old man, there's someone—a girl—Madge Andrews—lives twenty-two Chelham Place. If I stop one I want you to tell her—"

Rogers drew away from him, moaning. He lay still. After all it was of no use. You couldn't say the things you wanted to—not to anyone—not even to yourself. He dropped into a sort of emptiness that was not sleep, and came out of it once to wonder what a bullet really sounded like when it sang past your ear. If you didn't hear it, it meant that it had got you—somewhere. Supposing it didn't finish you. He imagined himself hanging on the barbed wire; he imagined unimaginable pain. He heard himself scream.

No. Not himself. Someone overhead. Someone shouting. A rush of feet. The door of the cellar screeched on its hinges. Out of the depths of their stupefaction they leaped straight up, their rifles in their hands, turned to meet at last the thing that had governed their lives, that obsessed their dreams.

Cobham slipped out his bayonet. The bayonet for close quarters. His teeth were set. His breath labored in a suffocating excitement. Something exploded deafeningly—close to him. The black confinement filled with a rush of sound through which he heard distinctly the soft "plunk" of a bullet burying itself in the wall opposite. So—it was like that. But it had missed him. He had still his chance.

A man stood in the open doorway, his arms outstretched against the mournful light. He was yelling at them.

"For Gawd's sake, keep yer heads, can't yer?"

Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan for August, 1927

It's over. They've signed—the Armistice. The war—over——”

Cobham heard someone laugh. What was that? What did they mean? Armistice? Who was that making that accursed noise? Cuffy, standing there under the hole of light—like a blasted clown in a pantomime—shouting and waving.

“It's over—it's over! Hurrah—hurrah—we're going 'ome——”

“Stop that, you yellow-livered swine!”

But Cuffy couldn't stop. He was giggling hysterically like a drunken girl.

“Stop it, do you hear? Stop it, stop it!”

But he couldn't stop. Cobham swayed on his feet. He couldn't let go his breath. Armistice. The War. Eh? Over? These three years of tension—of shame. These six months. For nothing? His job gone. His girl. Not a shot fired. People laughing. Cheering. And what they had made of him—scrapped—useless. Over—was it? He let go his pent-up breath. He lurched over to Cuffy.

“Stop it!”

But you couldn't stop——

He struck Cuffy in the teeth, with a kind of lust. He saw Cuffy's amazed eyes—just over the line of his fist—goggling at him.

“Ere! Wot cher think yer doing? 'E's my pal.” Fred Smith butting in. Red-faced, lowering, his head bent, like a charging bull. “You leave 'im alone.”

“Two to one. Gawd. The swine. Bloody Conchies. Give it 'em—give it 'em!”

Rogers—good old Rogers.

It happened. It exploded. The pent-up force was released. At last. Cobham with his free hand on Cuffy's throat felt it break in himself, like an abscess. It broke over him in a crushing wave of men's bodies—of beating, bruising hands and feet. He went down under

it. He couldn't save himself. He couldn't let go. He didn't want to. He'd got to choke the life out of someone—someone who'd done him out of something. As the thing under him went limp he felt pain slide into him—penetrate to his very innermost being—a cold, white pain, bright, shining, that twisted his vitals, tearing the breath out of him.

That idiotic old sack, dangling at the end of a cord; the round, chalked eyes and astonished mouth——

“Grump. Oh. What did you do that for, old man? What's the great idea?”

Six inches. No more. Because——

Bayonet—his bayonet.

Something went out of him. He collapsed—emptied.

He felt the bones of his skull crack under a plunging boot.

They'd got him—but, by heaven—not before——

The Sergeant-Major held the boy subaltern back from the cellar door. The gesture was oddly protective. There were things these children shouldn't see—incredible things. The Sergeant-Major himself was bewildered by them. He looked old and broken.

“It's all over, Sir. Don't you go in. Don't you go in. Decent, quiet-spoken men. Gawd knows wot got them. They was like mad.” He wiped the sweat from his mouth and looked up at the gray silence. “It was this 'ere bloody Armistice,” he said.

And later the C. O. dealt with the incident. “After all,” he told the adjutant, “there will be less truth told about this war than any war in history. We are so civilized.”

And against the two names “John Cobham and “James Cuffy,” he wrote “Killed in Action” with a steady hand.

